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B A G G A G E



Touching Lives
with James Merritt

LOST BAGGAGE

SERIES OVERVIEW

The truth of the matter is, most of us have some type of baggage we carry around with us all the time that we need to lose. This baggage weighs down our relationships with our friends, family, co-workers, and neighbors. It all too often destroys marriages, dissolves friendships, and damages our ability to relate properly to God. But the encouraging news for those of us who are tired of carrying it around is that we can lose our baggage. And not only can we lose our baggage, but we should lose our baggage. As followers of Jesus, we have been called to a higher standard in our relationships with others. We have a witness to maintain. We have a reputation to guard, because we don't just represent ourselves; we represent the Lord. So, if we are going to represent Him well, we must take the necessary steps to lose our relational baggage.

SERIES VERSES

Ephesians 4:31-32

Matthew 7:1-6

1 Corinthians 5

Matthew 18:12-17

LOST BAGGAGE

PART 1: Losing Your Baggage *Ephesians 4:31-32*

INTRODUCTION

In his letter to the church at Ephesus, Paul talks about the importance of ridding yourself of bitterness and instead being kind and forgiving towards others. He says, “Get rid of all bitterness, rage and anger, brawling and slander, along with every form of malice. Be kind of one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you” (Ephesians 4:31-32). The word “forgiveness” literally means “to let go” or “to send away.” It refers to a cancellation of debt. In essence, when somebody does you wrong, they are in your debt. So, forgiveness is your willingness to simply write off that debt. Now, there is not a more difficult decision to make in life than to decide to forgive someone. But Paul is making it clear that God took the biggest debt ever incurred, which are the sins of everyone who has ever lived, and let Jesus Christ pay for them and cancel them. Therefore, we must understand that we should be forgiving people because we are forgiven people.

KEY POINTS

1. We Must Forgive Freely

Jesus didn't charge us anything before He died for us. He didn't say, “First, you'll pay me what you owe me.” He didn't say, “First you clean your life up and get your life together, and then I will die for you.” He just died for us, free of charge. The only thing He asks in return for our forgiveness is repentance and surrender. Just like Jesus forgave us freely, we should forgive others freely, too. Unfortunately, some of us want to forgive the principle of the crime only after you've collected the interest of revenge. But true forgiveness carries no strings attached, no fine print, and no conditions.

2. We Must Forgive Fully

Forgiveness is not fractional. Partial forgiveness isn't really forgiveness at all. If we are going to forgive someone, we must do so completely. Do you realize that if God refused to forgive just one part, of one fraction, of one decimal point, or only one sin, none of us would have a chance at spending eternity with Him? He had to forgive every last sin in totality, and as His children, we should follow His example. One way to lose your baggage and practice complete forgiveness is to get rid of all bitterness, all rage, all anger, and all malice just as Paul instructs. Fractions will do you no good when it comes to forgiveness.

3. We Must Forgive Finally

When you cancel a debt, that debt can never be brought back up. You can never collect on that debt again. The same is true of forgiveness. When you forgive someone, you can't bring that sin or that offense back up again. You can't continue to hold it against someone because you've already forgiven them. We must put into practice the principle outlined in Jeremiah 31, “No longer will they teach their neighbor, or say to one another, “Know the

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PART 1: Losing Your Baggage

Ephesians 4:31-32

Lord," because they will all know me, from the least of them to the greatest,' declares the Lord. 'For I will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more'" (Jeremiah 31:24). What that simply means is that God doesn't hold grudges. He never throws our sin back in our face. He wipes the slate clean, and we should do the same.

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QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

1. Do you live in a way that shows you believe God's forgiveness is free? Or are you tempted to believe that you must clean up your life and pull yourself together before you approach Him for forgiveness?
2. When you forgive someone, do you forgive them fully, or do you only forgive them partially while holding onto bitterness? What do you need to let go of in order to completely forgive someone who's hurt you?
3. Is there someone you need to forgive with finality? Is there a grudge you've been holding onto that you need to release? How can you pursue that forgiveness and freedom today?

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PART 2: Part 2: Flying Stand By

Matthew 7:1-6

INTRODUCTION

One of the most widespread criticisms of Christians is that we are judgmental. We are told that we sit in the judge's seat far too often, pointing fingers at those we deem unworthy. But if you think about it, as human beings we've all sat in both seats. We've sat in the seat of the judge, and we've sat in the seat of the judged. While we can all admit that it's must easier to judge than it is to be judged, the truth is that nobody should be sitting in either seat. Jesus was very clear when He said, "Judge not, that you be not judged" (Matthew 7:1). Unfortunately, most people don't understand what Jesus meant by this statement. Thankfully though, He goes on to explain what He means, and He has a message that those inside and outside the church both need to hear.

KEY POINTS

1. Eliminate Improper Judgment

The word for "judge" is a Greek word "krino" which literally means "to discriminate" or "to make a difference." In other words, judging means offering a criticism that is either unfair or unjustified. When Jesus was talking to His followers about being judgmental, He was saying, "You ought to be the least judgmental people, and yet you'll battle being the most judgmental." Boy, was He right about that!

One of the biggest reasons we struggle so much with judging is that we take our perception of what we think God's people do, say, and look like, and then impose those perceptions on people who don't believe in God. If we don't like tattoos, we judge people who wear them. If we don't drink, we judge people who do. If we wear certain types of clothes to church, we judge people who don't. But we must be careful, because when our standard of calling anything wrong is anything other than God's Word, we are being judgmental. When you judge other people based on your opinions, your feelings, your self-made standards, and you do so in a condemning way, you are being judgmental. So, we have to eliminate these improper judgments.

2. Participate In Self-Judgment

In Matthew chapter 7, Jesus continues talking to His followers about judging. He says, "Why do you see the speck that is in your brother's eye, but do not notice the log that is in your own eye?" (Matthew 7:3). All too often, we tend to see a splinter in someone else's eye as a log, while we see the log in our own eye as just a splinter. We look at the faults of others with a microscope, and we look at all of our own faults with a telescope. But Jesus is saying that the minute we are tempted to judge someone else, we should take a look at ourselves instead. If we judged ourselves more, we would judge others less.

3. Validate Righteous Judgment

We must pay close attention what Jesus says next in Matthew 7. He says, "You hypocrite, first take the log out of your own eye, and then you will see

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PART 2: Part 2: Flying Stand By

Matthew 7:1-6

clearly to take the speck out of your brother's eye" (Matthew 7:5). Jesus is not forbidding judgment entirely. He is not saying we shouldn't confront our brothers and sisters if there is sin in their life. But He is saying that judgment should be practiced at the right time, in the right place, in the right way, and with the right spirit. You can never force a person to be what you think they ought to be, but you can always try to lovingly lead a person to be what God wants them to be. And that's the attitude we ought to have regarding judgment.

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QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

1. Do you have unfair and unjustified judgments of other people? If so, how can you begin to eliminate these judgments from your heart?
2. Is there something you've been judging someone else for but failing to pay attention to in your own life? What is an issue you can work on personally instead of looking for issues in someone else?

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PART 3: The Middle Seat

1 Corinthians 5

INTRODUCTION

One of the reasons why we have so little influence with those outside the church is because we are experts at condemning those who are on the outside while cutting slack for those who are on the inside. When people outside the church see us do this, it is no wonder that our light has become a flicker and the salt has lost its flavor. The same exact thing happened to the church at Corinth. And to make matters worse, everybody in the church knew about the problem, but nobody was doing anything about it. The result? The character of the church was compromised, and its witness was weakened. The church needed to lose some baggage. When a church today is in that same situation, there are three steps it must take.

KEY POINTS

1. Lovingly Correct The Sinner

In 1 Corinthians chapter 5, Paul writes about a man in the church of Corinth who was sleeping with his stepmother. Not only was this sin taking place, but the church knew about it and chose not to confront the man. They were so focused on how good they looked on the outside that they didn't want to focus on the cancer that was on the inside.

When it comes to sin in the life of those of us who claim to love the Christ that died for our sins, we not only have a right, but we have a responsibility to confront that sin. Yes, Paul was concerned about this man's sin, but what grieved Paul more than the man's sin was the church's indifference to the sin. When there is sin in the church and the church does not deal with that sin, the sin in the church becomes the sin of the church. There is nothing unbiblical about confronting a church member, a professing Christian with his sin and calling that person to repentance as long as it is done in the right way with the right spirit and the right motive. The purpose is always restoration and reconciliation, not revenge or recrimination.

2. Spiritually Protect The Church

Sin in the church is like cancer to the body. It spreads and contaminates. Sin that nobody deals with becomes sin that eventually everybody has to deal with. So as followers of Jesus and members of His body, we have to be so diligent and intentional when it comes to spiritually protecting the church. If we see a brother or sister struggling with sin, we should lovingly point that out and help them along the path of redemption and reconciliation. Because not only does their spiritual wellbeing depend on it, but the spiritual wellbeing of the church as a whole depends on it as well.

3. Positively Affect The World

Something that we as Christians can struggle to do at times is to surround ourselves with unbelievers. The very people whose company we do avoid, we shouldn't avoid. We ought to have friends who are reprobates, atheists, fornicators, adulterers, and agnostics. That is, in fact, who Jesus spent most

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PART 3: The Middle Seat *1 Corinthians 5*

of His time with – people outside the church. Sadly, those are the people we love to judge and condemn. Those are the people we isolate ourselves from. So, let's follow Jesus' example and begin to build relationships with people outside the church in hopes of leading them inside to a body of believers who can point them to Christ.

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QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

1. Do you lovingly correct your brothers and sisters in Christ when they are participating in sin? Or do you not bring it up because you don't like the confrontation?
2. How much time do you spend with people outside the church? Could you be more intentional with following Jesus' example and befriending those who aren't yet following Him?

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PART 4: Direct Flight

Matthew 18:12-17

INTRODUCTION

There are two words in our vocabulary that carry very negative connotations: conflict and confrontation. Now, with few exceptions, most of us don't like conflict. But we are going to learn from Jesus that neither conflict nor confrontation has to be negative. God can use conflict as an opportunity to demonstrate the love of Christ, to bear witness to the Gospel, and to teach other people how to work out their differences. The negativity comes in when the conflict is unresolved and the confrontation that is needed never takes place. The reality is that there are no problems too big to solve, only people too little to solve them. If we would just follow the simple instructions Jesus gave, we could defrost cold marriages, resurrect dead friendships, and restore broken relationships quicker than we could ever imagine.

KEY POINTS

1. Personally Admit There Is An Issue

We can all agree that some things are just not worth fighting over. Not every single issue we face needs to be bothered with. But even though there are some offenses that can be overlooked, doesn't mean all of them should be overlooked. When someone has hurt you, you should confront them not only because they hurt you, but because if they continue in that behavior, they could hurt others as well. In order to approach this conversation well, you must first admit that there is an issue. Quit pretending you are not upset, that you aren't bitter, and that you're not carrying a grudge. Just admit someone has hurt you and that the situation needs to be dealt with.

2. Properly Assess The Situation

Jesus uses a word that tells us why confrontation not only, at times, is necessary, but it is the most loving thing to do and the godliest thing to do, and the word is "brother." He is not talking here about a stranger or even someone who is just an acquaintance. He is talking about someone who is a part of the family faith. They are a part of the church. They are a spiritual brother and sister. If there is anyone who should be able to work out their conflicts, resolve their differences, and reconcile relationships, it ought to be people in God's family. Remember, confrontation is for the purpose of rescue, not retribution. You are not trying to revenge a wrong; you are trying to restore a relationship.

3. Privately Approach The Person(s) Involved

Once you have personally admitted there is an issue that needs to be addressed and you've assessed the situation properly, your next step should be to go to the person who hurt you directly and tell them about it. When Jesus is discussing how to handle conflict in Matthew 18, He gives us a great principle that is so repeatedly violated in our churches, in our homes, in our marriages, in our families, and in our friendships that causes so many other problems. Whenever conflict occurs, we should keep the circle of people involved as small as possible for as long as possible.

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PART 4: Direct Flight

Matthew 18:12-17

When you choose to handle a conflict with someone the right way and privately and personally go to the person who has offended you to try to work things out it is always a win-win proposition. It is not a win-lose proposition. You are not going to win an argument, but you are going to win a brother. If he listens, it is a win-win for both of you. If he doesn't, it is still a win, because you have done the right thing and he heard a needed word in his life. If you don't go to your brother or you go to someone else who is not part of the problem, then it becomes a lose-lose situation. You lose, the brother loses, and anyone not connected to the problem loses also.

4. Persistently Apply The Effort To Reconcile

After you have followed each of the steps outlined above, supposed the person you confronted doesn't listen. He refuses to make things right, and he refuses to admit his wrongdoing. Just as God doesn't give up on us, we should not give up on others. So, if he does not listen to you alone, go back to him and take someone else with you. When you take other people along with you, you are showing this person that this is more than a personal vendetta. If the person still refuses to listen, then other people can confirm not only that this person is unrepentant, but also that you have handled yourself the way you should, and you've done everything you can to reconcile the situation.

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QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

1. Have you been carrying around pain in your heart that resulted from an offense caused by someone else? If so, take the time to admit that you're hurting and that you need to pursue reconciliation.
2. If you have been offended by someone, do you need to go to that person to address the situation? Or if you've already done that without success, is it time for you to take someone else with you to try to find a resolution?
3. Are you on the other side of the equation as the person who has hurt or offended someone else? Is there someone you need to apologize to or ask for forgiveness from? If so, take a step to today to reach out to that person in hopes of redeeming the relationship.

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